Administrators and Learning:
An Experience in Self-Direction

By J. Foster Watkins and Nancy Loposer

THE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES employed in a recent section of AED 685 "Organization and Administrative Behavior" at Auburn University were intended to provide opportunities for practicing and potential school administrators to:

a) Assume greater responsibility for their own learning

b) Make decisions about alternative learning activities

c) Experience an effort at individualization of instruction from a student's perspective

d) Participate in group process activities.

Underlying these process objectives was the basic belief that school programs at all levels should operate so as to increase the probability that their products will be responsible, self-directional, free thinking decision makers who are able to relate to demands of a group oriented, democratic society. It is obvious to the more than casual observer of the current educational scene that such is not now the case in our educational organizations.

The first deviation from a traditional mode was away from a single textbook for the course. Instead, a modular approach to the generation of curriculum materials was utilized with six modules developed around major concepts such as "Bureaucracy and Educational Organizations," "Organizational Change Strategies," and "Organization for Instruction." Each module included a global objective statement; more specific performance objectives; a series of learning activities which included books and other printed materials, audio-tapes and slide presentations and films; and evaluation procedures. The learning activities were keyed to the specific performance objectives. The several activities in each module were grouped according to basic understandings and extended learning opportunities, with the students encouraged to make independent decisions about their depth of inquiry into any one modular concept.

A learning center concept was employed for the course. Utilizing the TTT area as a meeting place with hardware readily available, the material needed to outfit each module was accumulated for student use. The instructor was available in the TTT room during the regular class hours. Arrangements were made for the students to have access to the materials at other times on an individual or small group basis. The materials were also available through an overnight check out process.

The first two class sessions were devoted to a review of group process, communication, and problem solving skills through a series of academic games and task oriented activities. The philosophical slant of the course in a participative management direction plus the reliance upon group processing sessions as the closure activity for each module made such a beginning seem appropriate. Students were encouraged to utilize existing TTT materials which focused upon group problem solving if they felt the need for further study in this basic area.

Except for these initial sessions the class did not meet formally during every class session. Students were expected to process themselves through the modules as they deemed most appropriate for their individual learning styles and needs. As

mentioned previously, the terminal activity for each module was a group processing session which provided an opportunity for the students to synthesize and project possible applications of the conceptual content covered. Three of these processing sessions were video-taped and will be analyzed for possible growth in the students' abilities to verbalize their understandings and for increase in group discussion and problem solving skills. These processing sessions were scheduled periodically during the quarter. They comprised the only time variable which impacted upon the self-pacing nature of the course.

A key part of the instructor-student relationship was based upon a minimum of three one-to-one discussions of some thirty minutes duration between the professor and each student. These discussions were crucial in the efforts to individualize the process for each student. Divergent questioning procedures were employed which hopefully encouraged the students to address themselves to the "so what dimensions of their study" as applicable to their current employment situations. This attempt to focus directly upon each student as an individual was seen as the primary means of emphasizing the affective aspects of the instructional process.

The first of these professor-student discussions was scheduled after the completion of the first module. A particular emphasis of this first discussion session, after preliminary rapport was established, focused upon the reaction of the several students to the instructional approaches being employed. Four of the seven students expressed much discomfort with the modular approach with its emphasis upon self-directional learner behavior. Mention was made of the difficulty they encountered in making choices about which learning activities to choose. Being unable or unwilling initially to make such choices, they tended to try the almost impossible and highly frustrating task of completing all learning activities on the first module. A lack of confidence in their ability to make such decisions came through as they discussed their feelings of floundering and frustration. These students were encouraged to relate their concerns to the instructor on an individual basis as they moved through subsequent modules. By mid-point in the quarter, the skill of self-direction had been sufficiently developed to eliminate most of these concerns; at the termination of the course, these students were comfortable with and enthusiastic about this learning experience.

Though the class did not meet formally at the scheduled class time, early in the quarter the group of students developed a pattern of utilizing the learning center during that period of time on a fairly regular basis. Leadership from the group emerged which arranged common sessions with tapes and films which were written into the several modules. Informal processing sessions also developed during this two hour block of time which were rated very highly by the students on an evaluative questionnaire employed at the end of the quarter. The students who were having a degree of difficulty in adjusting to the self-directional, student responsibility dimension of the course tended to bring individual concerns to the instructor who, as noted earlier, was available at this time.

Mention was made of the utilization of video-taping capabilities for subsequent analysis from an evaluation vantage point. Additional evaluation components employed during the course included "in-basket" techniques and attitudinal instruments on a pre-and post-test basis. The students were also involved in a process of peer evaluation through the use of a group process instrument which was completed by each student on fellow students after the group processing sessions. The instructor was assisted in the preparation of the materials for the course by two doctoral students who served as resource persons during the quarter. These students also assisted in the video-taping and made systematic observations of the group processing sessions. Immediate feedback to the group was provided based upon these observations.

Analyses of the several types of evaluative data accumulated during the quarter are incomplete at this writing. However, early indications based principally upon student responses to an end-of-quarter questionnaire seem quite positive. Certainly these school administrators indicated that they have a better feel for the demands of self-directional learner responsibilities; an increased understanding of the modular approach to the development and delivery of learning experiences, and the potential for such an approach in efforts to individualize educational opportunities for students; a knowledge of the role of the instructor (teacher) in terms other than as the dispenser of information; and finally, an appreciation of the group processes as basic to moves toward a participative management model in administering school programs.

Only time will tell whether this increased knowledge and appreciation is translated into changed behavior as these administrators return to their positions-- the overriding objective of the course. The small number of students will allow the instructor to follow up the activities of the class during the coming year, to assess the attainment of behavioral objectives with a capital "B"--changed administrator role behaviors in the settings of their school programs.

Lest a false impression be left that all student feedback was positive, a number of points must be considered. Some concern was raised relative to the lack of student involvement in the identification of the major concepts which were developed in the modules. The logistics of the course were enhanced by the specialized TTT learning center, but there were still some problems with respect to gaining access to learning materials. The peer evaluation procedures and the individual discussions with the instructors were perceived by some students as lacking the desired degree of specificity. And finally, the instructor experienced many ambivalent feelings about his reduced "active or directive" involvement in the learning process, but was duly encouraged by his increased individualized involvement with students as they learned.

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